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THE CRISIS MACHINE

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The Old Executive Office Building on the corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and 17th Street in Washington DC is a colonial style antiquity with surface-to-air missiles on its roof to protect the President next door in the White House. Security in the OEB itself is tight, for many of the US's top administrators, including vice-president George Bush, have offices there. Tucked away quietly in one corner of the second floor is Room 200, a splendid suite of offices with plush carpeting and high ceilings, in which is found Dr Richard Smith Beal, whose title is Special Assistant to the President, Crisis Management and Planning. Beal, 38, is like a tranquilised young Mickey Rooney: short, chubby, outgoing and confident. Yet his benign appearance and manner mask his real, increasing power and importance. This devout Mormon and former academic is responsible for setting up a system to control and computerise international and internal conflict, the most important aspect of the Presidency in the nuclear age.

The system — based on six Digital computers — enables the US President and his aides to respond so quickly to potential danger in any world hot spot that it begs the question of whether there would be any consultation at all, with say a British Prime Minister, in the fast build to a nuclear crisis on European soil. Beal's Crisis Management Center — in an even larger suite along the corridor from his office — had its first major test in October 1983, when US troops demonstrated that President Reagan's administration was willing and able to use force for the first time in history to impose its will on

that part of the British Empire now known as the Commonwealth Caribbean. The operation had been nursed in secret at the CIA, the State Department and the Pentagon in Washington where for four and a half years officials had been seeking ways of putting an end to the left-wing government of Grenada. One feature of Beal's new network was that it would synthesise all the data from these various departments, so that the director of the National Security Council, Robert 'Bud' McFarlane, would be able to fulfil his true role as the President's National Security Advisor. The co-ordination of vital intelligence by the network facilitated the US invasion of Grenada at a moment when other crises, such as the horrific Beirut massacre of US and French troops, may otherwise have seen it abandoned. The success of the Grenada attack, which was in effect a trial run for other possibly bigger operations, ensured that the NSC's computer network would be institutionalised. From that fateful week in October 1983, every conflict would be increasingly monitored and managed by machines. For better or for worse, this vital operation of the Presidency was now being greatly influenced and manipulated by computer.

Further evidence that the Crisis Management Center has catapulted the US into a new era of crisis decision-making — that could even preclude its allies under certain circumstances — was given by Beal in a lengthy filmed interview in October 1981,

and again in March 1983. When asked about events which could lead to World War III he made it clear that the speed and advance of technology had taken decision-making out of the hands of elected and traditional authority and placed it in the memory banks of sophisticated machines.

For instance, in the event of Soviet forces attacking West Germany, the President of the US might not be in a position to stop the introduction of nuclear weapons. Decision on their use, according to Beal, would already be in the field of battle with the NATO Commander. There would be no time for consultation, except possibly to inform Washington of a fait accompli.

'The President would have that kind of situation already defined for him by the Defence Department,' Beal said. 'He would know what the priorities and options were.'

Decisions are made in advance to save time. All possible scenarios have been considered in wargames on the computer where possible developments are 'simulated' to prepare a plan of action. If such plans were to fit what was happening in the field, the Commanders — not just in Europe, but wherever in the world an incident escalated very quickly — could, under extreme circumstances, start firing nuclear weapons. Beal reiterated the President's position when he played down the chaos which ensued after the attempted assassination of President Reagan on March 30, 1981. In that inci-

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